

MASTERLY STORIES OF AMERICAN RANCH LIFE ::

By HENRY WALLACE PHILLIPS
Author of the Famous RED SAUNDERS Tales

AUNT JOHANNA

HOW come Aunt Johanna to be among us? 'Twas like this. Jimmy Arbuth was the first married rancher in the country—that is, new married, for the old timers, that come with their wives, had pardners as square and reliable as any man. Jimmy was the first to import a wife, and of course, I had to go work for him, out of curiosity.

Amelia, the aforesaid wife, was one of these here soulful, sympathetic women—the kind that had rather look sad than work, any time. At first you'd think she took the whole earth to her bosom, but when you got on to her game, you could see that first, last, and midding, right, left, up, down, sideways North, South, East, West, inside and outside, she sympathized with Amelia. I have seen tears of compassion start to her eyes from the sight of a doodle-bug squashed under the cruel foot of man, but I never see any feelings of any kind on her face at the sight of a man who had to suffer under Amelia's cookery. She could waste a whole day mourning over the state of widder-women in India, but she had not ten seconds to spare for the Art of Flap-jack making for a bunch of American bachelors.

Jim stuck to his bargain manful, but she used to have him wild about the eyes at times. There was a mean streak in her: she'd land on his pet sore spot, not scrapping, but so gentle and so sympathetic that you'd hardly suspect that she was rubbing salt and pepper into the cut.

Jim knew a lot of Amelia's back-east relations and he had no earthly use for them. As a matter of fact, Amelia wasn't a spring-chicken, and that bunch was mighty glad to see her gather a man that could take care of her, and lift the expense off their hands, but they weren't men enough nor women enough to use him decent when he came to get spliced. They tried to show they were doing him a great favor in speaking to him at all. So Jim had a little hand-to-hand talk with Amelia before the ceremony, and gave her to understand he was marrying into her family at the rate of one at a time. She agreed, of course, as Jim was the last hope, but she didn't live up to the agreement.

Well, Amelia got to howling for a sight of her dear Aunt Johanna, and Jim threw an Apache fit at first, for even Amelia's other relatives gave Aunt Johanna the ton-tom. He argued and he talked decent: he cussed and he fumed: he even went so far as to beg, but Amelia, seeing she had him on the run, just looked like an early Christian martyr and stuck to the job, until Jim says to me one day:

"I pass it up, Red. I've sent word for the old lady to come. She can't add anything to the trouble here, that's a cinch. I might as well have two of 'em as one. Mebbe it will be a diversion."

So here comes Aunt Johanna.

It was a nice morning I went to meet her, with the babies fit and keen for the forty miles to the railroad. Besides, the road was good, and I'd sneaked out and cooked Jim and me a bit of breakfast, behind the colt pens, where Amelia couldn't see us. So with a belfull, a good breeze, and a good road, I looked at things from a warm point of view, and I says to myself, the very fact that the rest of the bunch knock the old lady may prove she ain't so bad. You couldn't get better praise than the curses of some folks. And besides, with a hundred mile view scattered around you, you can't stay hopeless long.

I pulled up alongside the platform just as the engine come hissing and roaring in, shaking the solid earth beneath her. She looks good to you once in awhile, the engine does.

Well, here comes an elderly stout party, and looks about her, brisk and sure. When her eye lit on me she stared for a minute, and then poked at me with her green umbrella.

"Hey there, sonny! Are you the young man they sent to meet me?"

"Yessum," says I. 'Twas a long time since any one had called me "sonny."

"Well then," says she, "let's get a hustle on! Say!" to Pete in the freight room. "Get them trunks along, young man, we want to move!"

mind—I saw an old orchard—Oh, well, a man's in poor shape when he gets to seeing things on an apple that ain't even cider yet.

We sat there and swung our legs and munched our apples while Pete rustled trunks and began making remarks about my not helping him.

"Your business, young man! Your business!" says she, and waves the green umbrella!

"Yessum," says Pete and hustles without more argument. She had a way of telling you what to do that didn't admit of argument.

Aunt Johanna and me hopped into the buckboard and was off and away in jigtime.

"What might your name be, young man?" she asked me.

"Bill Saunders—Red Saunders."

The old lady looked off in the distance. "I s'pose," she says, "they call you Red—" here she stopped and I kinder begun to get my back up—I ain't stuck on people throwing the color of my hair at me—

"They call you Red," she says, "because of your rosy complexion?"

I looked mighty hard at her. "Yes," says I, "that's it—Ex-actly!"

And she begun to laugh. "Tell me honest," she says, "did you ever meet up with a red-headed person who wouldn't get mad if you mentioned their hair?"

Then I began to laugh, and said I hadn't, and me and Aunt Johanna was on a friendly basis. It weren't any time before she wanted to drive. No, you couldn't ask for a nicer little pair than Bud and Dandy—there weren't no real sin in 'em—but they was three-year-olds, and a forty-mile trip, going along easy, was just enough to wake 'em up, and make 'em playful. So I kinder hesitated. "Sonny!" says Aunt Johanna. "Don't fear, but hand me them lines."

"All right, now!" I says, "but if anything happens, your blood be on your own sun-bonnet!"

She said nothing, but gathered up the ribbons like a horse-jockey, and believe what I'm telling you! With the whip in her good right hand and the brake under her good right foot, Aunt Johanna tooted them babies up hill and down in a way to make a Black Hills stage driver look. She chuckled in her fat neck when she see how surprised I was.

"Born and raised in a colt pen, boy!" says she, "I could live on oats or mare's milk, either one, but I can't eat hay."

She sure was some surprising-looking old lady, with her riot-in-a-parrotage hat, and her big specs, driving away like somebody that's paid by the piece for it. And you bet I liked her more'n more all the time. "Jeehosaphat!" I thinks, "what made Amelia want her here? They don't rhyme no more than nothing."

As if she smelt what I was thinking of, she turns sudden, and says, "Everything, moldy about the ranch, I suppose?"

"How's that?" I says.

"Why, the place is rank with mildew, ain't it?"

"Excuse me," I says, "but you'll have to flag again—I've missed your train of thought."

"Amelia, man! Amelia!" she says, impatient, "She ain't dried up, has she?"

"Oh!" says I, flabbergasted: "Amelia! Yes, Mrs. Arbuth. Oh yes! Why she-er-er—"

"Young man!" says Aunt Johanna. "Facts is facts, and facts is stubborn things, whereby they ain't got any edge on Amelia, whatsoever. Be she my niece, or be she a tee-total stranger, I gotter say she's positive the most aggravating critter anybody ever passed a line over, and don't you go for to try to be pretty because she's a lady, because she ain't. Now I ask you once more, ain't Amelia still ashed-din' tears worse'n a pet tarrier sheds hairs?"

"Yessum!" I says—that's one of the best answers you could give Aunt Johanna—and usually it was the right answer, at that.

"Huh!" says Aunt Johanna, and give her attention to the team for a bit. "You Buddy hawss!" says she. "Come up on the traces, then!"

And quit a cheatin' Dandy! Foxy little critter, that Bud, ain't he? Likes to run on the level and lay back on the hills. Well, says she, as she give Mister Bud a taste of the bud, "they don't always work that on your Aunt Johanna!" Then she swung to the subject that was really on her mind.

"She was always like that, Amelia. The hull darn Universe just sot up nights lookin' to do her harm—that no account slimpsey-jimpsey little bag-o'-bones!" Her Ma used to bring her over to my house when she was a little girl. I had a hull attic full of dolls, dolls' houses and hobbyhorses and truck, to make a decent child think it had

landed in Heaven. But Amelia? D'ye think she played with 'em? Not she! She waited till lunch time and then cried all over my nice clean napkins and tablecloth, because she felt so sorry for the poor heathen! 'Jo, says her mother to me, 'whatever do you suppose ails her? What am I to do with her?'

"Amelia's mother allus looked like a scart rooster dodgin' a pup, and she had just about the same amount of sense."

"Well," I says, 'Mari, I don't know, but you let me have Amelia for a minute, and I'll kinder explain to her—I can't see no just reason for her being sorry for the poor heathen on my nice clean table-linen.' So I took her out, and explained to her about the poor heathen with one of my house slippers—and I allus had room enough to stand on, when I was standing on my own feet. I explained it to her good and hard, and she was moderate cheerful after that, when she come to my

"No'm!" says I.

"Red," says she, "you and me'll get along together like twins. Jim ain't got any cause to run, and that's a fact, but just that you've shown 'you understand me, I'm going to show 'em all what's trumps in this shack—Lordy! Lordy! There's Amelia now! Ready to spring a leak at a minute's notice! I'll beat her to it," says Aunt Johanna.

So when Amelia come out, looking like a moulting hen on a wet Sunday, all ready to grind out a bunch of sobs, Aunt Johanna hops out of the buckboard, falls on her neck and howls like a wolf! Lord! How a woman can, counterplay a woman! Amelia's best yelp was the squeak of a rubber doll agin a foghorn compared to Aunt Johanna.

The boys, lined up for the arrival, looked half scart, till I explained to them on the way to the bull-pen. And I met up with Jimmy and made things clear to him.

Well sir, Aunt Johanna must

Jim come out like a sunrise—told stories and laughed and carried on like a boy. And the other fellers blossomed a bit, too, so take it by-and-large, it was a champion meal. There was only one hitch. Of course, Amelia didn't approve of all this. You can't be fond of the heathen and enjoy seeing your own folk happy at the same time, it seems. She waited for a pause and then said in her most cultivated manner and most chilling tones, "What books have you been reading this summer, Aunt Johanna?"

The old lady dropped her knife and fork and fastened Amelia with her eye. "Cook books, Amelia!" says she: and after that you could have heard most anything drop. But we didn't hear anything out of Amelia.

Well sir, Aunt Johanna fitted in to ranch life. She sized up the colts and gave advice. Seems she knew pigs and calves and all kinds of critters—and I mean she really did know. One cow had been ailing ever since she was snake-bit—

We used to go for twenty-mile trips after she got wore down to riding. Jim give me full time off to show the old lady the best time possible, as you wouldn't hardly believe the difference in that ranch since the Art of Cookery broke in, let alone the fact that Amelia dastent chirp. Seemed to me she was bottling up for a celebration, but in the meantime, things slid along on the buttered side of prosperity. And then came the great event in the visit of Aunt Johanna.

When we were riding past a bit of Bad lands, one day, I heard an owl hoot. Now, owls don't hoot a great deal in the day time, unless they're Scotch by birth, and the little owls in a prairie dog town don't hoot, anyhow—it ain't much more than a chirrup. So I says, when an owl hoots, when there ain't any owl to hoot, there must be some friend of mine that's done something he hadn't orter.

I excused myself to Aunt Johanna and slid along to the sound, hooting like another owl, but at the same time keeping a leery hand on my gun, for there was a bucko around at this time, who couldn't be got to appreciate me at my true worth, and he might be tolling me along to where he could shoot me real comfortable. But I see a dried stick popping up from behind a clump of Gumbo—a stick with three short branches—and that was the sign between Crazy Bull and me—you lick your hand and rub it in the dust, and then hold your fingers kinder stiff and crooked and it looks just like a dried branch.

Well, I threw sign to Bull that no danger was nigh and then had his story out of him. A short horse and soon carried. You see, he was one of old Sitting Bull's Dog Soldiers, renegade Injuns from every tribe in America, but not all bad boys at that. Especially Crazy Bull. He was a great man among the Injun ladies, and so he was always on the run, with a husband or father or son or brother or another lady after him. To be popular among the ladies is almost like making little Susie Trouble an adopted sister. This time Bull got weary of hot-footing it and shot the outraged parties full of entirely convincing holes.

Sitting Bull tried to interfere to save him, but his credit never was very good along the Cannon-ball River, and it was Crazy Bull for the Bad lands and Solitude.

I asked him what I could do for him, and he wanted word carried to Tatonkah-Eyokah—that's Sitting Bull—and he wanted grub, tobacco, and minnewaukon chescheela. I promised to take word to Tatonkah-Eyokah, to furnish grub and 'baccy, but I drew a firm line on furnishing whisky.

"Minnewaukon, Ouanitch!" says I. "Tahko nea yappi, mea scholalei; Kola! Nea Tatonkah Withote-ko, shinto!"

Then, of course, I felt kinder mean at talking to a full grown man that way, so I says, "Come on out till I introduce you to a white lady!"

I knew at the same time Aunt Johanna would be tickled into spasms at meeting a full bloom Injun Bad Man, and to have a secret to keep—and there wasn't the slightest doubt about her being able to keep the secret. "Aunt Johanna," I says, "here's where you meet Crazy Bull—he's wanted for a killing, so please don't mention it. Tatonkah Witkote-Ko, shake hands with Aunt Johanna."

Bull didn't use a great deal of English, but he swung what he had polite and nice. Besides, he was a Jim-dandy, up starting Red Man, taller than me, and full as broad, although he weighed less, and his legs and arms was finished up as neat as a rifle barrel, and the skin on him was like new silk.

I saw Aunt Johanna sizing him up unusual strong, but I didn't have the faintest notion I was starting up that Othello racket in a new rig—There was something about Aunt Johanna that was no kin at all to my notion of Desdemona. Yet what has that to do with anything? Why is it we figure that if a woman don't pretty up in the face, she has no right to get sentimental? What's a good looking mug got to do with what you think and feel? Answer, you! Nothing, that's the answer! Yet every man-jack of us has his tee-hee on tap when a homely woman is mixed up in a love affair!

I've spoken of Aunt Johanna as an old lady. There's another misfortune of the poor in looks—you always call them old. As a matter of fact, she was under 50, which ain't an old woman at all, when you're stout and healthy. No woman's old when she falls in love, anyhow. But I'm breaking brush ahead of the trail. Seeing Aunt Johanna was interested in the little stranger, I took her along each

time. We lugged Bull tobacco and truck by the barrel. Amongst other things, pies—apple pies—made by the good right hand of Aunt Johanna.

Some feller said words are the instruments of thought. Blame poor instruments, when a man thinks the thoughts I think, when I think of the pies of Aunt Johanna. Why, them pies were like the world's best romance, wrapped in a forty-horse-power sunset. One slice of that pie was equal to a love affair and two good bets on a horse race. One bite of that pie and I would lend my worst enemy my brand new razor. Just to smell of it put me in such a frame of mind that Pete Skellet, the Alkali Poet, could read his product to me and go away without getting his hair mussed.

Now, if this was the effect on me, a well-fed Christian white man, what do you suppose them pies tasted like to a half-starved, heathen Red Injun?

I'll bet you could stack up the beauties of the past two hundred years on the reservation, and Aunt Johanna would put them down for the count with a single pie.

This, as I have stated, I plainly see in looking backward. At the time, I was so busy smuggling stuff out from under the unkind eye of Amelia, and being sure that nobody piped my trail on the way to Bull, that I never give these fancies a thought. Indeed, if you got an order from the court and searched my mind the only idea on the subject you'd be able to find was the innocent joy I felt, at being so well disguised by the presence of Aunt Johanna.

I didn't know she was in the play at all. So things ambled for awhile. To amuse our friend, we put a horse-blanket on the ground and played poker. Not for fun, neither—never! Aunt Johanna wasn't that kind of sport. We played five matches to a cent, and when Aunt Johanna got a set of three she'd raise Bull and me out of our shoe leather. She didn't seem to sense the idea that the hands could go higher. We made a picture, the three of us playing poker for dear life, with the Bad lands for background. The good old Bad lands lying out there like the skeleton of everything that ever was. Clean though. Dead, white-bleached, but clean. And one Bad Injun, one red-headed cow-puncher, and Aunt Johanna! Yea, it was a scene!

How in thunder the pair managed to get planning with me right on the job is more'n I'll ever tell you, but one day, after Aunt Johanna had cooked us the king-pin of all suppers, she ain't there; she's missing! And some of her clothes ain't there; nor is the horse she used to ride; gone too are three lovely pies she baked the night before.

All that's known to be left is two notes. One to Jim and one to Amelia.

When Jim opens his a couple of yellow backs full to the ground and the letter knocks him so he don't stoop to pick 'em up. He hands me the note and I read:

"Dear Jim: No fool like an old fool. I've skipped with the only man I ever liked. Enclosed will pay for the horse and buy a rattle for the baby. Keep Amelia jumping and she won't weep so much. God bless you and all the boys. Aunt Johanna."

"Well!" says Jimmie. "Well!" says he. And then he says, "She had sense enough to grab what she wanted. I hope to the Good Lord she's happy."

And I said "Keno!" to that.

Amelia's note was a little different. Jim made a copy of it, and brought it out to me. It said:

"Dear Amelia: Full oft I have thought about your noble ideas concerning the heathen. To whom else could I now turn so sure of sympathy as you? I've got one of my own to feed and take care of. He stands six foot six on the soles of his feet, and he'd send John L. Sullivan to the repair shop if he took a dislike to him. That's the only kind of heathen I can stand for. Perhaps I can feed him into a Christian. We leave for parts unknown tomorrow."

"We women should hold together for the right, Amelia, and if every darned cantankerous old maid would pick out a healthy heathen and fly with him, this world would be a better place. Don't fall down on the cookery, and I'll remember you in my will—honest. And besides, Jimmy is on to you now. He may light out with a lady heathen if you put it on him too hard. Be good to the boys and they'll be happy."

Aunt Johanna.

There was one more little note I didn't mention. It was for me. It read:

"Good-by, Red, and think kindly of a lonely old woman that never had a show. I won't forget you, and don't you dare forget me. Take the enclosed, fly to town, and have at least one parting drink with your own."

Aunt Johanna.

The enclosed was a twenty—positively the only money I ever accepted from a lady.



Yes, it was a scene!

house—that is, for Amelia. You see," says Aunt Johanna, "they gotter give in to me. I've got all the money!"

"Ah!" says I, several different and assorted things becoming clear on the instant. "You give 'em the gold cure?"

"Right you are!" says Aunt Johanna. "You can bet if anybody with money or without ever talked to me as I talk to them, there'd be a corpse to show for it. But they ain't got no shame, so they deserve every bit of it. And I just sit up nights thinking of what I'll do to 'em next. I'm getting so I ain't got no shame neither. Funny thing though, that Amelia sent for me. She must just know she can come nothing on me. I guess there ain't any body-scars left, but on Amelia's, lily white soul there must remain some memory of when I explained to her about the poor heathen."

When we wheeled to take the last turn around the cottonwoods by the creek, I see a saddle horse, just peeking his nose out from behind the calf-pens and I realized Jimmy was hiding there, ready to make a quick get away. So I waved my hand kinder careless as a signal that it was all right. I thought Aunt Johanna was looking straight ahead, but she caught me and asked so quick, "Who you signaling?" that I couldn't lie.

"Jimmy," says I, very meek.

"Was he goin' to run?"

"I think it likely."

"But you didn't think it necessary?"

have made medicine for Amelia from the jump, for that very afternoon, instead of sitting around and being company, the old lady shucks her fireworks make-up and tries the commissary department, working both hands like one, for there come a spell of things to eat, and the sight of a bustling in that kitchen, the like of which was never known before; and through the banging and the clattering of pans and tins you could hear Aunt Johanna singing her one and only song.

"'Tis the oooooold shii-yip of Zion hally-loo-YAH!" The way she come out with that "yah" at the end made poor old Mose, Jim's pointer dog, go a foot in the air with his hindquarters every time. He was a nervous old devil and that "Yah" was a specialty with the old lady.

And that night, my boy, we sat down to the result. Let me dream again! There was doughnuts, biscuits, steak, steam-fried potatoes, fresh bread, pie—and everything! Just the kind that mother used to make when she was at her best. And we, that had starved on Amelia's blasphemies, just waved both arms like windmills and the expression all the way 'round that table was something to really make Amelia weep. No more palms, that should ha' been took through a tube; no more bread like the sawed-off end of a cottonwood log; no more biscuits that would do for ammunition for a mountain howitzer; Ouanitchee! Here was food!

one of Jim's few blooded animals. He had a veterinary down—that is, he said he was a veterinary, but we all guessed he was only a veteran—and he didn't help none, but our only Aunt Johanna wrote out a medicine and Jim got it fixed at the drugstore and Mrs. Cow soon flew around as chipper as a calf.

Then Aunt Johanna took to bloomers and riding astride and Uncle Red piloted her around the country. It will give you some idea how much I thought of her, that I didn't unload that job on some of the younger boys, for she sure was a dream in her riding clothes! They got the fattest pair of overalls to be found, and trimmed 'em here and there to suit her. On top, she wore an old broad-brim, tied with a green veil. One of my best friends past me without speaking one day. Soon as he was by, he kept a-staring till I rode back and said to him, "Look here, Bill! Ain't you any more manners than to stare like that at a lady?"

"Moses! Red, hello!" says he. "I didn't even notice you! So it's a lady, is it? Well sir, you could have won any bet you liked off'n me on that question."

But Aunt Johanna and me we had some of the finest talks out. We just went to the bottom of everything and settled it once for all every day fresh. I never come across anything more entertaining than she was in an argument. She pitched in so whole-souled and honest, beating the air with her fists and getting off some of the most comical remarks I ever heard.